

Holiday Decorating with the Outdoors

Fri, 1/14 12:55AM 23:14

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

tree, wreath, branches, aaron, nice, norfolk island, plants, cut, prune, fun, container, dry, pine, indoors, pull, decoration, winter, evergreens, home, holidays

SPEAKERS

Speaker 3, Christa Hartsook, Aaron Steil, Olivia Hanlon

Christa Hartsook 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the Small Farms Podcast, a production of the Small Farms Program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life.

Olivia Hanlon 00:29

In this episode I visit with Aaron Steil, Consumer Horticulture Specialist with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, to talk about decorating for the holidays with nature. I'm Olivia Hanlon, ISU Farm Food and Enterprise Development Education Extension Specialist and we hope you enjoy the show. Aaron, welcome. We're glad to have you joining us today.

Aaron Steil 00:48

Yeah, I'm happy to be here.

Olivia Hanlon 00:50

All right. So welcome back. We've had you on a few times before, but why don't we start with a quick reminder for everyone out there that may have missed it on what your role was here at Iowa State and what your past role was here Iowa State?

Aaron Steil 01:03

Oh, sure. So currently, as a Consumer Horticulture Extension Specialist, I work with all of the counties across Iowa to answer the home gardening questions that come into their offices every day. So I'm serving as support and advice for all the various questions that homeowners

have about gardening at home. So I come to this role relatively recently. Before I worked at Reiman Gardens, which is also part of Iowa State University, and sort of several walls out there working with the public and helping that beautiful garden be as accessible to the general public as possible.

O Olivia Hanlon 01:49

Alright, thanks for sharing that with us Aaron. I figured your last role is probably what helps you be such an expert at what we're talking about today.

A Aaron Steil 01:57

Yeah, I love this topic and certainly out at Reiman Gardens, they're right in the middle of getting all of these kinds of holiday trimmings put into place. For many years, I was very lucky to teach classes like on wreath making and some other things like that. So it's a topic I really enjoy.

O Olivia Hanlon 02:16

We're very excited to have you. So why don't we dive in? We'll start with the obvious one. How do we go about choosing a tree for the holidays?

A Aaron Steil 02:26

Yeah, so finding a live cut tree and a high quality one, a lot of it is probably what you're already doing. A good live cut tree is usually local because it hasn't traveled as far, it's more likely to be fresh. A fresh tree has needles that are relatively pliable. One of the easiest ways to determine if the tree is fresh and relatively recently cut, or if it's a little drier and more likely to dry out or become less attractive over the weeks in your home is by simply taking the tree and kind of giving it a few taps on the ground. There will always be needles that fall off when you do that, but if you have an excessive number of needles that fall off, when you do that, then it's very likely that this tree is not recently cut, it is a little bit on the dry side and will continue to do that in your home. So that is a really good way to go about it. Going to a local Christmas Tree Farm and cutting down the tree yourself can be a fun family activity and is a great way to ensure that the tree is very fresh. Starting with a freshly cut tree makes all the difference in having a tree that lasts a long time in your home. When you think about it, we have a tall order we're cutting down like a six to eight foot evergreen tree and then asking it to live inside our dry, warm house, sometimes for as much as eight weeks. That's a long time. So making sure that you start with something fresh is a great way to have success with it for the whole season.

O Olivia Hanlon 04:09

Absolutely. So once we've found our fresh and beautiful tree, what are some good tips for taking care of the trees once they're in our home to keep them from drying out and keeping them looking nice all the way until Christmas?

A

Aaron Steil 04:23

Yeah, by far without a doubt, the absolute most important thing is to just make sure it's well watered. This is one of the harder things to do. Especially right after you bring the tree into your home. You know make a nice fresh cut at the bottom, submerge it in water. It will likely depending on the size of the reservoir and your tree stand and having a tree with a nice big water reservoir helps a lot. But especially those first couple of days, maybe even the first couple of weeks or so it will suck up a lot of water and making sure that it never runs out of water, is single handedly the best way to keep that tree fresh. You may have to fill it twice a day at first, it will definitely slow down as time goes on. But checking the tree and filling the reservoir is one of the most important things. Finding a tree stand with a nice big reservoir makes this a lot easier, setting it up so that it's easy to do this work. Sometimes it's kind of hard or tricky to get the water into the tree stand or to check to see if there's enough water in the tree stand. So coming up with a system that allows you to do that easily will also make it more successful. But that is by far the most important thing and if all you did was make sure that that tree never ran out of water, you will probably have pretty good success. There are a few other things you can do too - making sure that you don't put the tree next to a heat vent or radiator, keeping it out of the full blazing sun can help the tree last little bit longer as well, and you don't have to add anything to the water. There are a lot of kind of old wives tales about adding things like molasses or Sprite, or aspirin or sugar or some of these other things to the water that you put in the tree stand. None of those things actually really help and in some cases, they actually probably do more damage than good. Just good fresh, clean water, and making sure that it never runs out of water is all you need to keep that tree looking good for the season.

O

Olivia Hanlon 06:33

Wonderful. So we've covered the basics with the tree here. Why don't we dive into a little bit more of a fun topic. When we're looking outside around our farms or acreage, what kinds of other things can we pull to use for decorations out there?

A

Aaron Steil 06:48

Yeah, this time of year, there's certainly a lot of other evergreens that may be in your landscape that can be really nice. Kind of the traditional stuff like junipers, and spruce, and fur and pine if you have things like ewes, those can all be fun things to add for decoration, especially outdoors where it's cool. But also, pine cones, especially the pine cones of pine trees, the cones of spruces and furs don't make as kind of nice decoration because they're not as woody, they tend to be a little bit more papery. They also overtime will shatter or break apart, whereas, a cone from a pine tree like white pine will stay kind of intact, long term. Blue spruce, concolor fur, those cones will actually break apart over time. So they don't make as good decoration. Maybe if it's a short term thing, it could work well. The other thing I would encourage people to look for are really interesting seed pods or dried flower heads. So hydrangea is a great potential and a lot of us have hydrangea in our landscapes. The seed pods from things like magnolia are actually really pretty and kind of fun. The seed pods from any number of plants, blackberry lily, or even stuff that we wouldn't necessarily look at and be like oh that's a really ornamental seed pod, but just having something that adds a different texture

or color to a dried arrangement or a wreath or garland can be really interesting. It's kind of the sky's the limit, there if you like the way it looks, clip it off. There's some other things like tree pods or the fruit is really pretty and interesting. A lot of perennials produce some interesting pods, rose hips would be another thing that you could potentially use. So there's a lot of different options and then the dried flower heads of some perennials can be really nice too. So like purple coneflower is really pretty. The dried seed heads of a lot of the ornamental grasses can be really nice things that you can collect from your landscape and use in a lot of different ways for decorating around this time of year.

O Olivia Hanlon 09:06

So Aaron, you mentioned that you did wreath making classes out at Reiman Gardens?

A Aaron Steil 09:11

Yeah.

O Olivia Hanlon 09:12

So is it possible for us to take clippings from the evergreen trees that we may have around our houses and make wreaths with them?

A Aaron Steil 09:20

Oh, it absolutely is and the little bit of material that you might remove from evergreens around your property isn't going to cause much damage, it actually takes a lot less material than you might think. To pull together a live fresh cut wreath, one of the best places to get the material for that is the lower branches of your of your tree. So when you go out and you buy a Christmas tree and bring it in your home, you almost always have to remove a couple branches from the bottom. Those branches when you cut them apart can be really great base material for something like a wreath and so that's a great spot to get it. The Heinz and furs and juniper and other plants around your house are also really nice potentially. Just keep in mind that when you when you prune off these pieces to do it respectfully, conifers, like spruces and pines and furs don't grow back the same way that many of the other woody plants like shade trees and shrubs that we're familiar with grow back. So what I mean by that is they don't have as many secondary buds that will break open and replace material that's cut off. So if you trim back a shrub for example, the next season, you see a lot of new growth, where you made that pruning cut. When you prune back on on conifer, you very rarely see new growth come out. So if what you're removing creates a hole, that hole will be there maybe forever, or it will take quite a bit of time before it fills back in. So make sure that whatever you take off, that once it's removed, the plant still looks good to you, because it's going to look like that for some time, after you prune it off. But you don't need a lot of material to make a wreath and you can usually pretty respectfully remove material from the backside, from underneath, or from the edges and and get what you need without compromising the appearance of the tree or shrub you're taking it from.

O

Olivia Hanlon 11:20

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense, Aaron. I had never even thought about using those lower branches that you do have to remove anyways. So that's a good tip for folks out there. When we are doing that pruning on those trees, what are some things that we need to keep in mind? Are there best practices for that, aside from making sure that we are going to like the look of where we take it off?

A

Aaron Steil 11:40

Yeah, whatever you remove, you want to remove the back from its point of origin. You want to make a flush cut next to the trunk, you'll leave a little bit of a stump. If we get into pruning basics, you're basically leaving behind the the branch collar and the branch bark ridge, it's just like a little swollen area where the branch attaches to the trunk or the stem that it's growing from. You want to leave that part but removing the branch all the way back to, but not including, that branch collar is really beneficial because that's the spot on the tree where it's most efficiently going to be able to seal up that cut. So don't leave big long stumps, or don't prune off just part of the branch, prune it back all the way to its point of origin, wherever that may be, whether it's the main trunk or a larger branch, leaving behind that little bit of material so that it can seal it off really nicely. It also tends to look better when you do that, too. So that's probably the biggest tip.

O

Olivia Hanlon 12:37

Okay, so that is wonderful for us to use when we're thinking about making things like wreaths or using those branches in porch pots and things like that. Are there any certain plants that we can use in pots either inside or outside that are best at this time of the year?

A

Aaron Steil 12:53

Yeah, well inside there's definitely some things that are kind of fun. One of the more popular indoor plants that you'll see this time of year is Norfolk Island Pine. So this is a tropical conifer, native to the Southern Pacific Ocean kind of Norfolk Island, so kind of over in that region of the world. It does well indoors for us. It can be a cute Christmas tree, they're usually sold as pretty small, little plants. Sometimes they have glitter and bows spread all over them. But these can be really fun little additions and easy to find during the holiday season. Another one that I see often is Rosemary Topiary. So a rosemary plant that's pruned into kind of a conical shape. They can also be a really fun addition indoors. Neither these plants are winter hardy for us. So they would die if they were exposed to freezing temperatures outside. Both of them don't love how dry our houses are in the winter. So you might see a little bit of browning or tip die back. If you do see that, you can try to raise humidity or watch soil moisture as best you can. But those are some fun ones for indoors. Outdoors, I have seen already in in many stores, potted evergreens, like arbor variety, and small dwarf alberta spruce and some of these other things that are being sold as decoration for this time of year for the holidays. These can be nice additions to containers, but keep in mind, they're probably not going to survive the winter when their root ball is above ground in a container. Whether that's a decorative container or the plastic pot you buy it in, it is more likely to get damaged by the cold temperatures. So you can absolutely put

these plants in there and maybe you'll get lucky and you'll be able to plant it up in the spring in a new location and have it long term. But sometimes these things are priced in such a way that even if all it is is winter decoration and then it doesn't actually make it through the winter, that's okay you know you can enjoy it for that period of time and have that decor that period of time and still get what you need out of the plants. So those are out there. The other big thing that I see a lot of folks do is using cut branches of evergreens and also things like red twig dogwood or ornamental twigs, from things like winterberry that are covered in red fruit using those cut branches in containers. So one of the things you can do is you just kind of stick them in the container like you're doing a floral arrangement, but you're using boughs and branches, fill the container up, you just stick them right into the potting soil that's in that container. Then a lot of times we water it in and then it freezes and holds all those branches in place, so they don't blow around through the winter. And you have this really beautiful kind of green decor through the winter season in your hopefully frostproof container. A lot of times I recommend that folks, for the holidays, you can stick in, you know, fun lights, or sparkly things, or red bows and things like that, and then once the holidays are over in January, you just pull those pieces out, and you're left with green greenery for the rest of the winter, January, February, into March. You don't have to pull the whole thing out when Christmas is done. So kind of planning it out that way can be a lot of fun. When temperatures are really cold, there's those some of those things can stay green almost the entire winter with no problem. In fact, I know a lot of folks who have holiday wreaths that they put outdoors because they definitely stay fresh outdoors much longer. You can have a wreath outdoors for weeks and indoors, it will last maybe 10 days before it dries up. But I've known folks who have pulled the Christmas bow off of their wreath when Christmas is over and put a Valentine's Day ribbon bow on it, and then they pull that off and they put a St Patrick's Day ribbon on it, they pull that off, and they put an Easter ribbon on it. And then by that time, it's finally warm enough where it's starting to get a little dry and brittle, and they get rid of it. But it lasted the entire winter season because of the cold temperatures, so that's certainly an option if that's something you want to do.

O

Olivia Hanlon 17:14


Yeah, very good to know there. Aaron, do any of those plants that you mentioned require any special care? I know the indoor ones you said might require a little extra moisture. But aside from that, is there anything that we really need to watch out for with those?

A


Aaron Steil 17:28

Not really, you know, a lot of them because of the cold temperatures, they stay fairly consistently green and do okay for most of the winter season. Sometimes it can be beneficial to spray wreaths or kind of container decorations like this with an anti-transparent. So this is a product it's sometimes sold under names like wilt proof, but basically what it does is it blocks up the stomates that exchange water and gases, and so you get less water loss as a result. Sometimes that can help keep these things fresher a little bit longer. So that's one thing, especially if you're in a really windy location, may help get a little bit more time out of these cut branches and boughs through the winter months. It's not a requirement. Most of them do fine even without an anti-transparent, but it is a nice step. You basically mix it up according to label directions and just spray it on. You'd have to do it when temperatures don't make it freeze. So it's something you do early on, then that kind of sticks with the plant the rest of the winter


season. So that's something you could try but otherwise they're pretty low key, pretty easy to take care of. Basically you just let them be there until they don't look good anymore and then you get rid of them.

 Olivia Hanlon 18:43

Okay, very good to know Aaron. I do have one more quick question for you. Those Norfolk Pines that you mentioned, I've already seen those out and about and you said those will not be good to like plant outside. So when I had seen them, I was thinking have it inside for a while and then maybe you transplant it outside. But is that not the case?

 Aaron Steil 19:03


No, you wouldn't transplanted outside. You could definitely move it outside like some of your other house plants for what I call summer vacation. Right? As soon temperatures are consistently warm enough outside, you're not worried about frost anymore mid-May, you can move it outside to a shade or part-shade location and it can live it up in our hot humid summer and then pull it in usually around the end of September maybe the middle of September before things start getting really cold back into your home. It would appreciate that, but most houseplants appreciate that. It can also live its whole life indoors. The nice thing about Norfolk Island Pine is that it has that kind of conifer look to it with a little needles, but unlike our cut Christmas trees, Norfolk Island Pine doesn't drop individual needles, and so you don't get like little needles, little stickies in your carpet. When it's unhappy, it will drop a whole branch. So you'll notice that especially if humidity is super low, you'll notice that. That's why for some folks, especially if they don't need a big tree, those little potted Norfolk Island Pines make good replacements for a traditional Christmas tree. They're really easy to hang ornaments on because the branches are widely spaced. They tend to be pretty small when they sell them in stores, although they get very large over time, but they can be a lot cleaner than a traditional cut tree when it comes to needle drop.

 Olivia Hanlon 20:27

You can't go wrong with less needles on the floor there.

 Aaron Steil 20:31


Yeah.

 Olivia Hanlon 20:33


All right. Aaron, is there anything that we missed that you'd like to add today?

 Aaron Steil 20:38


I think it's just a it's a fun time of year and hopefully, folks, you know, one of the things I have noticed is that all of the things that we talked about earlier for like making wreaths or decorating containers, you can typically get from a florist too, so you can go into a florist and ask for, you know, pine boughs or cedar boughs, or something like that. But like many other things this year, in particular, there has been some pretty significant supply chain challenges and so it's not quite as available as it is typically. So if you're running into that, certainly collecting some of this stuff from your own yard is still a good option. So keep that in mind, you may have a harder time getting your hands on some of these things than you normally do.

 Olivia Hanlon 21:23


Okay, so before we let you go here today, Aaron. What is your favorite way to decorate for the holidays with the outdoors?

 Aaron Steil 21:31


Oh, my favorite way to decorate outdoors?

 Olivia Hanlon 21:33

Your favorite one you've done in the past.

 Aaron Steil 21:35

I don't know, I just like having fun with it and being creative. I do enjoy lights, it's a very dark time of year. So I often incorporate lights in just about everything I do outside. So you know, if I decorate a container, sticking a string of lights in with it. Since most of the time when I'm at home, it's dark out because I'm at work when it's not, it's just a nice way to experience that. And it's just a fun little extra, it's of course not necessary but I really enjoy that kind of stuff. Especially the LED lights, they don't put off a lot of heat. So they don't impact drying out or anything like that. That may be the big, like C9 bulbs and some of those things used to so it becomes a much more viable option. With new lights, there's quite a few that work on little solar panels and some of those other things so you can even get it to places where you don't normally have electricity available, and that just makes it more fun. So I enjoy doing those things. Absolutely. Aaron I never even thought about the lights drying things out. So that's a good little note to add in there too. Well, thank you very much for joining us, Aaron. We enjoyed having you on and hopefully folks enjoy this podcast and get decorated for the holidays. Yeah, have fun with it.

 Olivia Hanlon 22:56

Thanks, Aaron.

 Sneaker 3 22:57



SPEAKER'S BUREAU:

This program is brought to you by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. This institution is an equal opportunity provider for the full non-discrimination statement or accommodation inquires, go to www.extension.iastate.edu/diversity/ext.